

A Critical Language Policy of Place: Framing an Ecological Perspective in Language Education

Miguel Mantero

The University of Alabama

Abstract

This paper stresses the importance of enacting positive transformation in language policy and planning in the United States as delineated by the idea of radical localism and supported by a critical pedagogy of place. Initially, I ask the following questions: Does NCLB impact opportunities for English language learners to take part in their communities and transform their surroundings as well as their overall education? Given the U.S. history in language policy issues, how should language policy be framed in order to inform ELL instruction? I draw on sociocultural theory and critical pedagogy to frame my arguments as well as language policies from UNESCO and the African National Congress.

ELLs and Public Schools

Teacher-student interactions can affirm students' cultural, linguistic, and personal identities in order to create classroom conditions for maximum identity investment in the learning process. Cummins (2001) states that ELLs will be reluctant to invest their identities in the learning process if they think their teachers do not like them, respect them, and appreciate their experiences and talents. It is natural for teachers to filter the curriculum through their own cultural experiences and to teach in the same way they were taught, which results in the mismatch between the racial and ethnic profiles of students and teachers. This mismatch increases the likelihood that teachers will not connect with all of their students in a meaningful way (Latham, 1999; Mantero & McVicker, 2007).

Policy makers and administrators are faced with the challenge of ensuring that all educators in the school have the opportunity to develop the knowledge

base to teach culturally and linguistically diverse student populations (Cummins, 2001). Over the past two decades, the field of demographics has become vitally important to education policy makers at all levels. The suburban areas of cities will see a major increase in student diversity, which includes more minorities, more immigrants, more students learning English as an additional language, and more students in poverty (Hodgkinson, 2001).

The U.S. Department of Education indicates that more than 5 1/2 million English language learners are enrolled in public schools (Flannery, 2006; McCardle & Leung, 2006), increasingly impacting teachers and teacher education programs alike. Moreover, these students formerly found predominantly in urban areas, are now moving into smaller, more rural communities. These communities then face particular obstacles because of their previous status serving fully homogenous populations.

About 50,000 ESL teachers practice in public schools in the United States, one per 100 ELLs. In addition, they must offer particular help for those students from nondominant groups, many who do not have English proficiency. They must also bring to ELLs a view of the prevailing culture and with applicable content information in their courses. Additionally, a National Center for Education Statistics study of roughly three million U.S. teachers, 41% confirmed that they teach limited English proficiency (LEP) students, (Brantley, 2007; Flannery, 2006; NCELA, 2008). In 2004, barely 2.5% of all teachers who instructed English language learners had a degree in bilingual education or English as a Second Language (ESL). For the purposes of this paper, it is important to note that teacher (inter)action is framed by current language policies. Many marginalized social groups have seldom felt a sense of affirmation and respect for language and culture from their teachers (Hodgkinson, 2001). Often their intellectual and personal talents are rarely expressed in the classroom. Moreover, ELLs must take part in the practice of education as explained by Wells (1999), where instructors provide opportunities for students to invest themselves and guide their learning. According to Wells, the practice of education entails the following characteristics: 1) activities undertaken such that, although chosen by the teacher for their cumulative contribution to an understanding of the central theme, they allow for groups of students to make them their own, and progressively to exercise more choice over how they are conducted; 2) a combination of action and reflection, and of group work, individual reading and writing, and whole-class discussion; 3)

explicit goals and making the relationship between these goals and operations by means of which they are to be achieved the subject of discussion; and, 4) frequent *opportunities* to express (individual) beliefs and opinions, to calibrate them with those of their peers, and to change them in the light of persuasive argument or of further information.

In schools, the practice of education is currently framed by NCLB (2002), where, in part, NCLB Title III states that its purposes are to ensure that children who are limited English proficient, including immigrant children and youth, attain English proficiency, develop high levels of academic attainment in English, and meet the same challenging State academic content and student academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet. Moreover, according to NCLB legislation, Title III provides the framework to assist all limited English proficient children, including immigrant children and youth, to achieve at high levels in the core academic subjects so that those children can meet the same challenging State academic content and academic achievement standards as all children are expected to meet, consistent with section 1111(b)(1).

NCLB then turns to defining the main purpose(s) of education agencies who receive funds under Title III: To increase the English proficiency of limited English proficient children by providing high-quality language instruction educational programs that are based on scientifically based research demonstrating the effectiveness of the programs in increasing English proficiency and student academic achievement in the core academic subjects. Given the above scenario, I ask the following questions: (1) Does NCLB impact opportunities English language learners have to take part in their communities and transform their surroundings as well as their overall education? (2) Given U.S. history in language policy issues, how should language policy be framed in order to inform, and perhaps change, approaches to ELL instruction?

Many changes have impacted United States culture, including the arrival of immigrant populations, which has brought many different types of families into our communities. This has also impacted our classrooms and has brought with it many languages and cultures. Some students are learning English in classes along with native speakers. This poses challenges for teachers used to only working with native English-speaking students. Moreover, these teachers have limited or no formal training in teaching non-native speakers (Barron & Menken, 2002; NCELA, 2008). According to the National Center for

Education Statistics (2008), the latest student population consists of learners speaking more than 400 first languages.

Language and Education

We cannot address language policy and planning without putting forth a view on the role of language and education. The present view of language borrows from Vygotsky's (1978) and Halliday's (1978) perspectives. Essentially, language permits us to explain mental function and affords us the opportunities to mediate, organize, and alter our lives in our communities. Understandably, communities are built on relationships which are based on (knowingly or not) linguistic, political, or even religious characteristics of individuals. However, for the purposes of this paper, and from a sociocultural point of view, one characteristic should not be used to specifically define a community (for example, English Language Proficiency). It is the understanding of community as much more than the sum of all of its parts which should guide education and, in this case, language policy.

In order for individuals to interact successfully with a community, they must collaborate with others and become aware of the common understanding and shared meaning in daily activities. Fundamentally, the education of an individual is supported by being able to appropriate and transform knowledge during social activity. This process can be summarized by three global phases. The first, *cognitive adjustments*, takes place when individuals realize that the community and contexts in which they live are very different from their past experiences. This allows learners to begin to interpret their surroundings differently. In the second phase, *tools or artifacts are transformed*, individuals transform language or objects according to their own experiences and use them to meet their own needs in the community. In the last phase, *transforming surroundings*, individuals interact with others and have an impact on any ensuing activity. This final phase is based on participants' interpretation and negotiation of the tools or artifacts involved in communication. This also transforms the community's practices and perceptions regarding the language, communicative activity, or artifacts used during interaction.

Within the various activity settings in which we participate throughout our lives, we are afforded opportunities to negotiate the meaning of concepts, words, and goals with others; this assists learning and cognitive development.

Instructors and policy makers that operate within this sociocultural framework view language as a tool that allows for cognitive development. This approach assists students in becoming successful language learners and contributing members of their communities while moving through the above phases (Lave & Wagoner, 1991).

Successful students and their families help sustain, transform, and build communities. Wells (1999) sees this as the collaborative purpose of public education:

(As) newcomers become progressively more able to engage in solving the problems that the community faces, they may contribute to a transformation of the practices and artifacts that are employed, and this, in turn, transforms the community's relationship with the larger social and material environment. (p. 242)

Generally speaking, a central purpose of language is to help co-construct knowledge, discourse, and activity within particular societies in an effort to educate its members. Scholars support the notion that language and its ensuing meaning is learned as we interact in society. We also learn how to manipulate our surroundings and the social experiences of those close to us as we learn language (Garcia, 2002). Speakers (and learners) of any language have to be able to balance the social aspects of language activity with the more personal creation of language. This can be accomplished by using its prescribed conventions with invented forms (i.e., spelling, pronunciation, usage.) that allow language to change over time as we engage in meaningful discourses within our communities.

Meaningful discourse permits those involved to develop their knowledge of language and language use as well as the comprehension of information presented during interactions (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Arguably, one of the reasons that schools exist is for students to acquire new knowledge. Those that interact in "instructional settings" in traditional academic environments or alternative educational contexts must contend with the reality that meaning in discourse has to be agreed upon if the participants are to accomplish their goal(s). Rommetviet (1979) and Halliday (1978) underlined the importance of speakers agreeing on the meaning potential of language within a given social situation if they were to build new knowledge and accomplish their goal(s).

Furthermore, as Leontiev (1977) argues, the motive that underlies activity is almost as important as the understood goal. In order to accomplish goals

individuals must be able to mediate and structure activity during goal-directed action. Therefore, the present paper is framed by these sociocultural constructs with the assumption that approaching education as reliant on motive, activity and goal allows us to investigate policies which impact ELL education. More importantly, the education of ELLs is directly impacted by No Child Left Behind legislation, and as previously mentioned, Title III. However, in order to situate NCLB, it becomes necessary to present a brief overview of language policy in the United States.

A Brief History of Language Policy in the United States

The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 (P.L. 90-247) became Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which embodied a consensus that the “sink-or swim” approach to teaching English was both an educational failure and a denial of equal opportunity for language minority students (Crawford, 1999). As of 1970, with the Hispanic dropout rate was approaching 75 percent (NCES, 2004), there was an eagerness among educational systems and government to find a way to best implement this new law. The goals of the Bilingual Education Act were unclear and vague in that the intent was solely to promote a transition to English proficiency *or* also to maintain and develop the students’ native language (Cummins, 1995).

At the onset of the 20th century, when English was taught to immigrants for the purposes of assimilation into the American culture, there was not yet a conscious effort to make the field of ESL a profession. However, the profession began to grow in response to the increasing number of immigrant and refugee children entering the United States during the 1960s. The 1968 Bilingual Education Act was reauthorized in 1974 and placed increasing emphasis on the importance of developing English-language skills (Lyons, 1990).

The mid 1970s showed mediocre results that generated a backlash against bilingual education. Many educational icons began to criticize native language maintenance as a distraction from being assimilated into the melting pot of American society and pushed more for rapid English acquisition. Others feared that promoting bilingual education would generate a separatist attitude among the minority population in the United States. The reaction to these criticisms sparked a vote in Congress to limit Title VII support to programs where the native language could only be used to allow a child to achieve competence in the English language.

Policy issues regarding how language minority or ESL students are served have evolved around power relations between groups in the broader society (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). During the 1970s and 1980s U.S. school policies for serving culturally and linguistically diverse students focused on separate school programs to address what was being viewed as problematic in regards to English proficiency and academic achievement. Teachers who were considered ESL specialists pulled students from mainstream classes for a limited time period to receive services and extra help with English, similar to the approach taken in special education (Crawford, 1999).

The discontentment with bilingual education and the U.S. language policy was affirmed by Senator S. I. Hayakawa (R-CA) who argued that the nation was sending confusing signals to immigrants by requiring them to learn English as a part of naturalization but inviting them to vote and attend school in their native language. Senator Hayakawa proposed a constitutional amendment declaring English the official language of the United States (Dunn, 1997). He helped to found an advocacy group to lobby for Official English and against bilingualism in public life; thus began the English Only movement. Although Congress did not act on the English Language Amendment at the federal level, 21 states adopted such legislation by 1996. Throughout U.S. history, there have been various events of language-based discrimination and coercive assimilation, yet rarely have language conflicts assumed national proportions (Ovando & Collier, 1998).

Debates in Congress continued on minority language issues, and over the past few decades, federal policy for the protection of the educational rights of language minority students has gradually evolved through court decisions. The landmark court decision that has had the most significant impact in defining legal responsibilities of schools serving LEP students was the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974). This decision ruled on the grounds of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that approximately 3,000 Chinese students in San Francisco were not being provided an equal educational opportunity as compared with their English-speaking peers. The Supreme Court decision did not mandate a particular remedy but suggested bilingual education and/or ESL as possible solutions. Thus, the impact of this court decision was immediate on the support for bilingual education programs, and was later clarified by the decision in *United States v. New Mexico* (1978) which, in part, states: “[a] denial of educational opportunities

to a child in the first years of schooling is not justified by demonstrating that the educational program employed will teach the child English sooner than a program comprised of more extensive Spanish instruction.” Moreover, this sentiment was echoed by the Carter administration as it struggled to meet the challenges of establishing the Department of Education in the 1980s.

Additional mandates for school districts to implement programs for language minority students came from the U.S. Office of Civil Rights (OCR), which issued the *Lau* Remedies. OCR became aware that many school districts made little or no provision for the education of students who were identified as LEP. On May 25, 1970, the former Department of Health, Education and Welfare issued a memorandum to clarify Title VI requirements concerning the responsibility of school districts to provide equal educational opportunities to language minority students. This memorandum explained that (1) Title VI is violated if programs for students whose English is less than proficient are not designed to teach them English as soon as possible or operate as a dead end track, and (2) parents whose English is limited should receive notices and other important information from the school in a language they can understand.

In the 1990s, the practice of tracking language minority or LEP students began to present problems and was questioned. Elementary and middle schools were restructuring to meet the needs of heterogeneous classes and to eliminate practices that segregated students into what became permanent tracks (Ovando & Collier, 1998). Schools began to move toward a model of school-based management which encouraged shared decision making among the principals, teachers, and parents at each local school. The reforms still did not adequately address linguistically and culturally diverse students. ESL and bilingual educators were petitioned to collaborate actively in the transformation in order to create a deeper change needed to create equitable, safe, and meaningful environments for learning for all students (Cummins, 1995).

NCLB does not dictate a particular method of instruction, but gives each state the freedom to choose the most appropriate delivery model for instruction of ELLs. This act also requires states to establish English proficiency standards and provide quality instruction, based on scientific research for English language acquisition. These educational policies and funding for ELL education are frequently based on assumptions about the nature of language proficiency and how long it takes LEP students to acquire sufficient English

proficiency to follow instruction in the regular or mainstream classroom (Cummins, 1996). NCLB evidences similar assumptions which have yet to be unconditionally acceptance in the fields of second language education and bilingual education. Under NCLB, the academic progress of every child is tested in reading and math, including ELLs. All ELLs are tested annually to measure how well they are learning English, and states and schools will be held accountable for results. To administer English reading and writing tests to students who have only been learning English for a few months is unlikely to yield any useful accountability data regarding the quality of instruction in that student's classroom. To its credit, NCLB does provide a stipulation that allows for minimal first language support in schools and during the evaluation of ELLs. However, this has limited the benefits of using the student's first language in schools because administrators and teachers now tend to use the student's first language to modify the student's behavior or to demonstrate how much English the student really doesn't know (given a student's high level of first language fluency and proficiency).

There are two major mistaken assumptions regarding the nature of language proficiency among educators and policy makers in North America. First, as Dunn (1997) points out, we cannot draw inferences about children's ability to think logically on the basis of their familiarity with and command of Standard English. Second, children's adequate control over surface features of English, which includes their ability to converse fluently in English, cannot be taken as an indication that all aspects of their English proficiency have been mastered to the same extent as native speakers of the language (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

These misconceptions about language have clearly contributed to students' difficulties in academic success, which is symptomatic of the underlying educational structure that disables culturally diverse students (Schur, 1999). Research demonstrates that ELL students' conceptual foundation in their native language is more important to and explanatory of the processes of academic language proficiency than their English conversational fluency (Brantley, 2007). Such conclusions suggest that curriculum should be developed on the theory that academic success demands higher-level linguistic and cognitive skills that, once developed, will transfer readily from the native language to English.

As pointed out earlier, ELLs must take part in the practice of education (Wells, 1999) in order to create a sense of community and assist in the

development of their students' identities. But, how is NCLB framing this activity? There is very little room for native language support or multilingual education under NCLB. If we return to the three global phases which lead to transformation, ELLs who have little or no English language proficiency may have great difficulty emerging from the cognitive adjustments stage and, therefore, difficulty in transforming their cultural and cognitive tools – language being the most important tool for both processes.

English-only pedagogy and policy do not support first language development and native language literacy. This is a myopic approach to ELL education. Therefore, ELLs who are served under NCLB legislation may be denied their place in multilingual communities and, as Burbules and Berk (1999) mention, give up on their goals to become contributing members of the society at large. NCLB legislation may be to blame for producing (or enforcing) individuals in American schools who are unable to participate in the cultural practices which lead to modification and transformation of their scholastic achievement, natural functions, and identity because current education practices are framed by a monolingual and monocultural language policy as described earlier under Title III. Such results are supported by policy makers who do not sustain or approve of bilingual education in the United States and who do so because of the “shared goal in U.S. politics”: the assimilation – linguistic and cultural – of non-English speakers (Lippi-Green, 1997; Ricento, 1998). This shared goal has become, effectively, a hegemonic campaign against those already marginalized groups in our communities across the United States.

Moving Beyond the Monolingual Narrative

It is possible to illustrate what U.S. language policy makers may believe should be reflected in official stances – as exemplified by NCLB and Title III. In part, this is due to the fact that NCLB is absent of any framework which addresses the linguistic make-up of the communities and societies in the United States. However, Hymes (1996) indicated the following six core assumptions about language in the United States which may indicate some of the thinking of language policy makers when drafting Title III in NCLB:

1. Everyone in the U.S. speaks only English, or should.
2. Bilingualism is inherently unstable and possibly unnatural.

3. Foreign Literary Languages are worthy for study, but not foreign languages.
4. Most everyone in the world is learning English anyway; therefore there is no need to learn about different cultures.
5. There are two types of language, right and wrong.
6. Verbal fluency and personal style in another language is suspicious.

The above ideas may be troubling, and some would argue to not take Hymes' thoughts seriously. However, the point is to illustrate where the current NCLB and ELL policy may have its roots as scholars have had a difficult time understanding how the United States came to be enveloped by an English-only policy that creates conditions for subtractive bilingualism. Moreover, Hymes' ideas frame what I call the monolingual narrative in U.S. education and language policy.

The predominance of structuralism in U.S. language policy and planning has helped support these assumptions that, in the end, may move the United States towards a linguistically homogenous nation. That is, according to structuralism, language is the product of innate mental models which exist only in human minds, and are not directly impacted by nature and reality. And, given the events of 9/11, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there seems to be an even a greater desire for mental, cognitive, and cultural homogeneity in the United States as evidenced the tighter restrictions on immigration from countries who have been good neighbors and supporters of U.S. foreign policy. This mindset has increasingly embedded itself in U.S. language policy. That is, immigrants need to assimilate culturally and linguistically if they are to contribute to the American way of life. But what about the immigrants' way of life? Is educational language policy in the U.S. an attempt to Americanize individuals while they learn English? Is language policy in the U.S. more about institutionalizing an epistemology rather than providing opportunities for immigrants and their children to succeed in their varied communities – regardless of the language(s) spoken in their homes?

On such points, NCLB legislation is in stark contrast to UNESCO's international initiatives and objectives. The UNESCO Task Force on Languages and Multilingualism (2007) was established with the intention of providing realistic synthesis of UNESCO's activities based on the 33 C/5 intersectoral program for languages and multilingualism, and launched the following objectives: to promote multilingual education including mother language

instruction, to safeguard endangered and indigenous languages, to promote multilingualism and linguistic diversity in literate environment, media and cyberspace, to promote languages as a means of dialogue and international integration, and to improve UNESCO's effectiveness through the integration of linguistic factors.

Additionally, the African National Congress foreshadowed UNESCO's efforts by developing *A Policy Framework for Education and Training* (1995), which strives to eradicate language oppression by providing the following guidelines. First, language policy in education should be the subject of a nation-wide consultative process, to ensure that proposed changes have the broad consent of the language communities that will be directly affected by them. Second, no person or language community should be compelled to receive education through a language of learning they do not want. Third, no language community should have reason to fear that the educational system will be used to suppress its mother tongue. Finally, language restrictions should not be used to exclude citizens from educational opportunities.

The policies by UNESCO and ANC are clearly situated in and directed towards participation in multilingual communities. These communities also exist in the United States, but do not benefit from a supportive language policy. NCLB and Title III are solely oriented towards English acquisition rather than a participatory framework. Arguably, the second point may be impossible to achieve. But, what I find important about the second point is that we could strive for an awareness of our human right to choose and have a voice in the basic policies which impact our children and our communities. If we take these policies and combine them into a renewed beginning for the U.S. Language Policy for K-12 education, it may focus on the importance of striving for multilingualism and linguistic diversity in literate environment, media and cyberspace and promoting languages as a means of dialogue and international integration. Also, this renewed policy would ensure that proposed changes have the broad consent of the language communities which will be directly affected by them and would dissuade any fears that the educational system will be used to suppress mother tongues. Even more importantly, this renewed policy would help us realize that language restrictions should not be used to exclude citizens from educational opportunities. These guidelines allow us to elaborate further on how it could help classrooms come to life as well as the current approaches in language education.

A Critical Language Policy of Place and Pedagogy

We are often presented with two different views of language education: We may approach ELLs as framed by acquisition or participation (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Sfard, 1998). The instruction as acquisition metaphor (AM) is focused on the various linguistic forms being studied (Sfard, 1998). As Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) note, the AM “allows us to see language as a set of rules and facts to be acquired and permits us to discuss learner language in all of its complexity” (p.155). That is, language is only seen as a prescribed system of grammar and syntax. Whereas the instruction as participation (PM) metaphor is ecological in nature and stems from the process of a person becoming a member of a community that is engaged in various activity settings (Sfard, 1998). Given this ecological perspective, the importance of interaction and activity cannot be overstated. Learners are framed by language that they produce during semiotic activity. If language is, as van Lier (2000) proposes, embodied then the following question must be what does it embody? Language embodies our social experiences (van Lier, 2000). We may find ourselves and our social experiences as imposed by language policies. Therefore, NCLB and Title III may not help improve the education and opportunities English language learners have to take part in their communities and transform their surroundings. The PM stresses the ‘contextual engagement’ that is needed during language learning (Rogoff, 1990; van Lier, 2000), and, also includes acquiring different ways of communicating and acting according to the arenas and rules of the diverse groups that make up a society. A language policy driven by participation in society (as outlined in my proposed US Language Policy for K-12 Education) lends itself to a critical language policy of place which is ecologically situated. This stems from Burbules and Berk’s (1999) critical pedagogy of place. Burbules and Berk (1999) state that a critical pedagogy [of place] “is an effort to work within educational institutions and other media to raise questions about inequalities of power, about the false myths of opportunity and merit for many students, and about the way belief systems become internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life” (p. 50).

Sustaining this notion is the idea that the capacity for change is alive in the details of our everyday practices that Dewey (1938) emphasizes in his observation that individuals gain knowledge by taking part in activity which, for our purposes, is mediated by language. Additionally, moving towards a critical

language policy of place will assist us in framing ELL education so students are able to develop in and through the three global stages mentioned earlier as explained by the work of Vygotsky (1978), Leontiev (1977), and Wells (1999). Interacting from and within critical language policy of place allows for language acquisition to be fostered and approached as cognitively situated (Forman & Cazden, 1985). In other words, language acquisition takes place as students participate in the discourse of the school and broader community. This they cannot do in a language they do not speak or understand.

We cannot address language policy without talking about teaching practices if we are to strive for a critical language policy of place. A critical language policy of place will also encourage teachers and students to pursue the kind of social action that provides opportunities to improve not only their lives and languages, but those of others as well. Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) describe several distinctive characteristics which help frame this endeavor. Policies emerge from the particular societal attributes and are multidisciplinary. Also, language policies should be experiential in nature to reflect an educational philosophy that is more than learning English to earn a living. This holds close the relationship between the classroom and cultural politics, and it explicitly makes the limits and simulations of the classroom problematic. As Knapp (1996) mentions, it insists that students and teachers actually experience and interrogate the places outside of school as part of the school curriculum that are the local context of shared cultural politics that inform language policy in the United States. A critical language policy of place will support a “tool-*and*-result” pedagogy, which explicitly observes an ecology between the methodological choices a teacher makes and the resultant knowledge and understanding his or her students build and produce rather than the current language policy under NCLB which supports a “tool-*for*-result” pedagogy and separates an approach from the knowledge it produces (Newman & Holzman, 1996). In other words, NCLB provides a framework and guidelines for using English (the tool) in society, the workplace, school for building relationships, making a living, or getting and education (the result). But, in reality, there are many, many communities in the United States which choose a language depending on the desired result. But this mindset has yet to impact U.S. policy. Currently, for U.S. policy, there is one language and expected results – all in English – rather than providing opportunities for the possibility of unforeseen results in many languages.

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